

Greek American Oral History Project

Oral History Interview
with
Bessie Pothos and Mary Vasos

April 25, 2006
Sacramento, California

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[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

Alicia Harris: Today April 25, 2006, I am going to interview Bessie Pothos who currently lives at 190 Gifford Way, Sacramento, California, 95864. I am going to visit her at her home to discuss the Greek American Oral History Project. My name is Alicia Harris, I am the interviewer and this is tape 1. We also have here Mary Vasos, who is Mary's sister. [pause 5 sec.] Well we have Bessie and Mary here today to discuss the Sacramento Greek American community. Let's begin with a little bit about your guy's background. First, Bessie Where were you born?

Bessie Pathos: I was born in Sacramento, California.

Alicia: What is your birthday?

Bessie: June 20, 1925. I was born in Mercy Hospital. I've lived here since then.

Alicia: How about you Mary?

Mary Vathos: I was born in Sacramento, December 9, 1928, Sacramento Mercy Hospital.

Alicia: Tell me a little bit about your mother?

Bessie: Our mother emigrated from Greece.

Alicia: What was her name?

Bessie: Her name?

Alicia: Yes.

Bessie: Here name was Athena Kokkinis.

Alicia: Can you spell that?

Bessie: K-o-k-k-i-n-i-s and she was born in Paratonia, which is the southern part of Greece, in an area called Arcadia, and its Tripoli...

Mary: And her town was called, the village where she was born, was called [spelled out] P-i-a-l-i--

Bessie: And she was born there in May of 1896.

Alicia: Tell me a little bit about your father. Where was he born?

Bessie: He was also born in Greece. He was born in the North Central area. It's an area called Rouneli and his village was called Agianarina Marina, which means Saint Marina. And he was born on March 24, 1888. He came to Sacramento, approximately 1908, and our mother emigrated in 1923.

Alicia: So, why did your father immigrate?

Bessie: Because he was very poor. It was a large family. They were very poor, and like everybody they had a dream that if they came to America they'd get rich and go back and live happily ever after. However, very few ever went back! Because once they got here they found out that money was not flowing in the streets, and they had to work hard and save money to send back to their parents to help their families. Also, if there were daughters in the family they

had to provide dowries. So, it was up to the brothers to provide dowries for the sisters.

Alicia: How many siblings did he have?

Bessie: Well, he had an older brother his name was Loukas, but he was killed during World War I. My father is the second, and he had a brother James, another brother Frank, a brother John, and he had two sisters. One was called Morfo and the other was Eleeni.

Alicia: Did any of his siblings immigrate with him?

Bessie: Yes, they all came together. Let's see Loukas, my father...

Mary: I thought Loukas was here--?

Bessie: No. James and-- No James! The three--the five--the four older ones came together. And then they came as I said about 1908. And then in 1914, when World War I broke out they decided amongst themselves that the older brother Loukas would go back to Greece and fight for their homeland there. Unfortunately, he was killed, and my father was the second brother, so they decided that he would enlist in the American U.S. Army, and he did. He went overseas and he fought in France during the World War, World War I, and he was always very proud of his service. In the early days he used to march, whenever they had Fourth of July parades downtown, but then he got older he couldn't do it anymore. But he'd go down to the B.F.W. and the American Legion, he was very proud of his service.

Alicia: Tell me about your mother? What made her immigrate?

Bessie: Well my mother, her two older brothers, one was George and the other was Nick, they immigrated to the United States and settled in Woodland, California. My mother was left with her mother and she had a younger sister Rebecca and a younger brother Peter, and as I said life was very difficult and she worked hard. She had to leave school in the third grade to help her mother. They farmed potatoes, so she had to go out and work in the fields, and then she used to have to go out in the mountains and gather wood for firewood, cause course that's how they heated the home and that's how they cooked. Then our mother taught herself to sew and she became an excellent seamstress, and she was almost the seamstress for the village. She used to make a lot of clothes and things for other villagers. My mother was very talented-- she could do--

Mary: She was very bright, uneducated but very bright.

Bessie: She did beautiful handwork; we have samples of the gorgeous needlework that she did—embroidery. She just taught herself to do all those things, and after working in the field all day picking and planting potatoes or picking whatever, at night she'd stay and work under candlelight. All the young girls had to make things for their dowry, and my mother brought some of the things with her, which she gave to us later on.

Alicia: What were some of those things?

Bessie: beautiful light pillowcases--they had to be light things--

Mary: Lilies--

Bessie: --and then she brought that beautiful hand woven blanket.
Remember?

Mary: Uhuh.

Bessie: It was Greek! I remember it. She did it on a weaving machine.
What is it called?

Alicia: A loom?

Bessie: A loom! Yeah she did it, and it was beautiful. I remember the
early days whenever there was a holiday she would put it out on
the bed.

Mary: It was itchy.

Bessie: Yeah!

Mary: I remember that! It was always itchy. [Laughs]

Bessie: But she had beautiful things that she brought—pillows— but they
only came out during the holidays not during everyday.

Alicia: What did her father do?

Bessie: Her father was a farmer in the village, but he died very very young.
My grandmother was pregnant with Peter when he died. So my
mother as I said had to leave school and help her mother raise the
baby and work out in the fields.

Alicia: Did your grandmother ever re-marry?

Bessie: Oh, no! [Together with Mary]

Mary: Oh, no!

Alicia: O.K-- How did they feel about leaving Greece, your parents?

Bessie: I think they were sad of course, but you know as I, they thought they would make a better life for themselves-- [Pause] For themselves but also to help the relatives in Greece.

Alicia: So when they first arrived in the U.S. did they come straight to Sacramento?

Bessie: No, no--

Alicia: O.K.

Bessie: They landed in New York and they ad hardly any money. I mean all they had was... They had worked and saved just enough for passage on the boat. I guess they came with class or whatever--

Mary: You talking about Steerage? --The lowest...

Bessie: Steerage, yes! So they landed in New York, but in those days always a job was waiting. You know [when] the Greek young men came off the ship there was always somebody there to sign them up. So they got signed up to work for the railroad. So they worked up on the railroad and they worked their way across the United States and the end of that-- in those days they use to call it like a section gang--somewhere down, I don't know where, it was down around Vacaville, Fairfield. Then they use to come to Sacramento on the weekends. You realize, they didn't want to be stuck out there you know, working on the railroad tracks. So they

saved they came here. They saved their money and some how they were able to buy a little bakery. It was a combination grocery store and bakery. It was on Fourth Street. and it's across the street where the Firehouse Restaurant is now. And they--we had--I don't know what happened--There was a picture of my father driving a horse and he delivered bread with this little horse with a little carriage. I thought you'd seen that picture--but I don't know what happened to it.

Mary: I've never seen it. I didn't know that he had a bakery on Fourth Street.

Bessie: Yeah! And then from there they outgrew that-- and then saved up more money and moved to the place on 8th --on the corner of 8th and L Street. They opened up a little larger bakery there but they outgrew that, and then moved to a lager space on 14th and I street. I think it was across the street from where the public market is today. They moved to North Sacramento and they bought property on Del Paso Blvd. where the bakery expanded. It was at one time the largest bakery north of San Francisco! They had a fleet of 30 trucks used to deliver bread all over Northern California--It was quite an establishment!

Mary: And then the Depression came--

Bessie: The Depression came--

Alicia: What happened when the Depression came?

Bessie: Ok-- when the Depression came the customers could no longer pay there. They would deliver bread to the restaurants and grocery stores and couldn't collect any money--no one could pay their bills!!! They had a large payroll and everyone that worked at the bakery was practically either a relative or someone from Greece.

Mary: It was predominantly Greek employment.

Bessie: Yeah almost all Greek and you know--

Mary: Except for Mr. Potato

Bessie: Mr. Potato [chuckles] and then they decided--

Alicia: Who was Mr. Potato?

Mary: He was the bookkeeper and Accountant and he had a huge belly and he looked like a Potato--so we used to call him Mr. Potato--.

Bessie: Mr. Potato [in sync]

Mary: We didn't call it to his face but it was our family joke.

Bessie: He was--oh a Frenchman-- I remember--the was very bright-- He told my father who was the manager of the business that -- well my Father's two brothers worked in the business...one in the bread department and my uncle John was in charge of the cakes in pastry department--So Mr. Potato told our father that he had to cut back on the payroll. That he needed to let some people go. My father said, "Well, who am I going to let go? My cousin? My brothers? These young men that I grew up with? You know he has five kids-- and my other brother has six. How am I going to lay them off?"

So that is what happened-- they went bankrupt during the depression.

Alicia: So how did you get through the depression?

Mary: [chuckles] We ate what they call margarine--it looked like white grease!!

Bessie: Lard.

Mary: They gave us some yellow powder to mix and make it look like butter and we had powdered milk.

Bessie: You know our mother was very resourceful--but what really helped us was we had an uncle--well we used to call him uncle--he grew up with our father -- and one day came home with him. When he came we all lived together and when my mom and dad got married her never moved out of the house--he just stayed there. His name was Kasta Panos.

Alicia: Can you spell that?

Bessie: K-o-s-t-a P like Paul P-a-n-o-s. He had a nice steady job with the--

Mary: SP

Bessie: Southern Pacific. And he was the only one who had a steady job and brought home steady money. So, every week he would pay my mom for his room and board and my mother used that money to buy food for all of us.

Mary: As I said she was very resourceful—

Bessie: Somehow she was an expert seamstress-- so she was able to make all of our clothes, which at the time we wanted to buy from the store like everybody else [chuckles]. But now that I look back the clothes that she made for us—

Mary: I mean she didn't even use a pattern. She would just go and cut something out and make it look beautiful. She was very bright!

Bessie: Her favorite colors were red and pink. All of our dresses were red and pink. We had a sister Helen, who died two years ago, and the three of us were always dressed alike! She always sewed three dresses alike. And our sister was younger so she didn't have the same as me! I wished that I could have had a dress of my own- a different color!

Mary: Not like everybody else!

Bessie: And then one time I asked my mother "Why can't we have another color?" And she said, "What color?" I said green-- so she made us. Do you remember Mary? She made us green jumpers, with green tool, jumpers with green and white blouses? And wore them to church and all the ladies asked my mother "Why are you dressing the girls like Irish Men?"

Mary: Irish Women [chuckles]

Alicia: What church did you attend?

Bessie: It was the first church. It was the Greek Orthodox Church down at 620 8th street. It was a small church but everyone knew each other --like a big family.

Mary: During Easter time they would take all the seats out of the church and they would have us stand up all mashed in there. We always lit candles on Good Friday. Many people's hair and veils would catch on fire [both chuckle]—you could smell it! [both chuckle again]-- and that was our church.

Bessie: But I guess it was too small to hold everybody.

Mary: Yeah

Alicia: Did your parents speak English when they arrived?

Bessie: Our father taught himself to read and write. He had beautiful penmanship. As I said he worked in the bakery but he worked outside. But our mother stayed at home in those days before the depression. When I went to school I could not speak a word of English. When I went to Kindergarten, I could not speak one word because we always spoke Greek at home. My mother didn't know any better. But after the depression my mother had to go to work to help support the family because my father developed a very serious heart condition. So he wasn't able to work anymore. My mother had to assume the role of breadwinner and went to work in a cannery.

Alicia: Which cannery?

Bessie: Well the Del Monte cannery on 16th and C streets. But most of the time she worked at a cannery called Big Richards on Richard's Blvd. A lot of the Greek ladies worked there--but a majority of them worked.

Alicia: What kind of canning company was that?

Bessie: It used to--

Mary: do everything.

Bessie: Everything--

Mary: Fruit, vegetables--

Bessie: Tomatoes.

Mary: Tomato sauce--

Bessie: They canned lot of tomatoes and Del Monte used to do peaches. I remember mama talking about peaches.

Mary: The Berkett Family was very prominent here in Sacramento.

Alicia: Yeah, I've heard of--

Bessie: The Richards Family was prominent

Mary: Berkett Richards?

Bessie: Yeah the Richards family was prominent

Mary: Oh, they still have a home on facing the park on William Land Park.

Bessie: So a lot of the Greek ladies worked there. When our mother got paid for the first time the first person she paid was the teacher at the Greek school. The taught us how to read and

write Greek because that was important to her. So even though she had a meager salary she would pay the Greek schoolteacher so we could go to school.

Mary: The thing about the cannery was that the Greek women did not become floor ladies. Most of the floor ladies were Slovenian

Bessie: and Armenian.

Mary: They treated Greek people awful—[chuckles]. [Imitating worker].
“Oh you didn’t do that right--do that over again. That’s not the right size of peaches--whatever ” Anyway-- [chuckles]--

Alicia: Did your parents ever pursue American citizenship?

Bessie: Oh, yes our father became a citizen. I think he was awarded citizenship because of his service in the Army.

Alicia: How soon after he arrived did that happen?

Bessie: Well he here about 1908. Then in 1914 was the war and 1918 it ended so right around there. I think he was granted citizenships or he got it somehow. Our mother when we were young I remember she was going to school. In those days—

Mary: you had to memorize everything—

Bessie: You had to go to school to take citizenship classes and she was very good! I mean every night we would quiz her. She had questions and we would quiz her. She knew more than we did about the Constitution and the President—

Alicia: That’s how it usually happens.

Bessie: Yeah!

Mary: The judicial and the legislative—

Bessie: Oh, yeah she knew the three branches—

Marry: [with Bessie] three branches—

Bessie: What each branch did. She knew a lot more than we did-- and when she went down and got her citizenship as soon as she could. We were young—

Mary: Yeah, I remember her studying for it.

Bessie: Every night she would study and then they would give a test every so often.

Mary: [to Bessie] Was it in the mid-thirties do you think it is?

Bessie: I think so. It was in the thirties so she got her citizenship and she was very proud of that.

Alicia: What did your parents miss most about leaving Greece?

Bessie: Their families! The families about the only thing maybe—They really didn't miss the life there, because it was so hard for all of them. In fact my father never wanted to go back to Greece.

Mary: He would never do it.

Bessie: He never would go.

Mary: Never had the nerve.

Bessie: He died in 1951, and he never wanted to go back. Our mother did not go back until 1960. From 1923 she didn't go back until 1960.

Mary: Now, people who come here from Greece, they go back and forth,
two or three times a year.

Bessie: It's just like going to San Francisco.

Alicia: When she went back, did she stay there?

Bessie: No, she stayed for about six months, at that time, of course her
mother was gone. The only people who were there were her
younger brother Peter and her sister Rebecca.

Mary: [inaudible]

Bessie: Then she decided that she was going to bring her sister and marry
her off. So [chuckles] that's what she did! She got her sister to
come here and we had a neighbor two doors down and they were
Greek. Somehow she arranged for her to meet this Greek
gentleman and before we knew it—

Mary: He was a widower—

Bessie: Yeah. Also, during that time my mother brought her niece here,
Peter's daughter, and the same thing. The lady two doors down
knew a young man from her village and so she arranged that the
two would meet. One day my mother called and she said, "Baciki
is engaged" and I said, "Engaged she doesn't know anybody! How
could she be?" She says, [with a Greek accent] "Never you mind."
[Chuckles] Anyways they're still happily married.

Alicia: Speaking of marriage, how did your parents meet?

Bessie: Oh, it was arranged. My mother came here and went to Woodland to live with her two brothers. Of course, the brothers brought her here with the thought that they were going to marry her off to somebody. So somehow they gave her two choices, our father who was in the bakery business, and there was another gentleman who worked for the railroad. Well my mother didn't want to go live out in these sections where the gangs or whatever were, so she chose our father. They were married here in Sacramento at our church. They were married July 20, 1924. They had a beautiful wedding.

Alicia: So did she ever re-marry?

Bessie: No, no, no!

Mary: No!

Bessie: Our mother was a remarkable woman.

Mary: She sure was—

Bessie: After our father died, the first thing she did was go out and buy a car—

Mary: With out telling us, 'cause we were all married and gone by then.

Bessie: So our cousin had a used car—

Mary: Lot

Bessie: So she went to him and he said, "well aunt you don't know how to drive," she said, "Yes I do!" She'd been watching all these years.

He drove around with her, and by golly she could do it. Even though she had never—

Mary: Didn't she take lessons though? Later—

Bessie: yeah, she did! We were shocked when she bought a car because our father wouldn't let her drive before. He'd usually say, "No, no" cause she would kill herself, cause she would kill us. So he wouldn't let her drive, but that was the first thing she did.

Mary: That was the Green Hornet wasn't it?

Bessie: Yeah, she had an old Oldsmobile—

Mary: Green—

Bessie: We use to call it the Green Hornet. [Chuckles]

Mary: [Chuckles]

Bessie: It was quite a site around town. She would go around and pick up all the Greek ladies as many as she could fit in her car, and drive them to church or drive them to meetings or wherever—

Marry: They called it a Kamikaze pilot 'cause she would zoom down the street. [Chuckles]

Bessie: [Chuckles]

Alicia: Did she belong to any organizations?

Bessie: Church organizations, she belonged to all the organizations.

Mary: G.A.P.A.—

Bessie: Yeah, well her favorite one was Pan Arcadia Society, because that's where she was from the Arcadians and this group consisted

of people from the same area so they were just like relatives. My mother was a charter member, in 1925 they formed a group and it was called, Procdos, [Spells out] it means progress, and my mother was one of the charter members of that. That was in 1925 and in 1939, after a lot of pressure from the archdiocese, they changed the name to Philotochos, which is a national church women's organization.

Mary: Translated it means bend it forth.

Alicia: Lets get this back to what they thought about America. Do you think they had trouble adjusting to the aspects of life in America?

Bessie: Well, they must have, but of course they never talked about it. Our father and our uncle went in to business and they seem to –

Mary: When you grow up like we did its like a Greek ghetto, there were a lot of Greek families, and we didn't know anyone who wasn't Greek. We didn't know there was anything besides lamb to eat.
[Chuckles]

Bessie: [Chuckles]

Mary: You know we never knew about beef or anything [chuckles] it was a Greek ghetto! All our friends were Greek; we went to Greek Church, Greek parties, Greek events—

Bessie: That's right! Our whole lives centered around church.

Mary: Well it still does, actually. [Chuckles]

Bessie: You know especially for our mother, but our father was active in the American Legion—

Mary: V.F.W.

Bessie: V.F.W. He had other things, 'cause he had American friends.

Mary: [Inaudible]

Bessie: Our mother mostly stayed in the house, so she didn't have an opportunity to meet anybody. She made sure we went to Greek school, we went to Sunday school, and we participated in all the Greek events. For me especially being the first born it was difficult for me because my mother treated me like we were still living in the village. I could do anything, go anywhere, or talk to anybody who wasn't Greek! At school kids would go to football games or whatever and I couldn't go and they couldn't understand why we couldn't participate in these events. One time I was elected to the class council in school and my parents wouldn't allow me to go to the class council meetings after school. My councilor called me into the office and wanted to know why I wasn't attending the meeting and I told her. She said, "I'll call your parents" and I said, "oh, no, no, no 'cause I'm going to get in trouble if you call them!" So we lived a very restrictive life.

Alicia: Ok, well that's a great transition into life in Sacramento. Can you tell me the names and ages of all your siblings?

Mary: Our first—

Bessie: Well I'm the oldest in the family and our second sister was Helen.

Alicia: What year was she born?

Bessie: She was born June 29, 1927 and she died June 10, 1990—

Mary: [with Bessie] 2004

Bessie: 2004—and Mary you know her age and our youngest sister is
Anastasia, and she was born February 22, 19—

Mary: four years after so 1932.

Bessie: 1932—we were all going to Sacramento at the Mercy Hospital

Mary: She was a spoiled brat. [Chuckles]

Bessie: [Chuckles]

Mary: 'Cause she's four years younger.

Bessie: Yeah, by the time she came around my mother had become more
Americanized so she could participate in all the school activities—

Mary: Awww, she was awful! She was awful when that happened.

Bessie: But you know things that we were not aloud to do.

Alicia: Where did you live?

Bessie: We lived at 1617 W Street we lived there—

Mary: Before we lived in North Sacramento.

Bessie: When our father had the bakery in North Sacramento we lived
there for about four years from about nineteen hundred—

Mary: 118 Whittier Avenue?

Bessie: Yeah, 118 Whittier Avenue, North Sacramento, and we lived there for about four years in the early 1930's before the Depression. Well, after the Depression we moved back to our house.

Mary: That same house.

Bessie: 1617 W Street and our mother lived there until the day she died.

Alicia: Wow!

Bessie: She came here as a bride and stayed there—

Alicia: [with Bessie] And stayed there all those years

Bessie: all those years until she died at the age of 96.

Alicia: Wow.

Mary: Except for Osteoporosis she was very healthy.

Bessie: Never took a pill in her life. Drove until she was—

Mary: 93—

Bessie: She should have been driving—but anyways—

Mary: The reason she stopped driving is, were she lived there were alleys, so she had backed her car out of the driveway—the garage—to go somewhere and she rammed into a fire hydrant. It just so happens there was a policeman parked near by at the gas station. He saw it, came over, took her license and said, "Can't drive anymore" that was it. Before that, you know what she use do to us? We'd take her keys away from her; she was my accomplice, [pointing to Bessie] and hid them all over the house. So the girl, the little

Italian girl who took care of her called. [Imitating the girl] Mary,
Mary come quick, your mothers driving the car again!

Bessie: Well before that it was Ms. Felton the next-door neighbor.

Mary: She would call too.

Bessie: She'd call, "your mother is out driving again." So we would go
and get the keys, but somehow the next day she was driving again.

Mary: She was so funny.

Alicia: What were some of your earliest childhood memories?

Mary: Well—Greek school, Greek dances—

Bessie: [Chuckles]

Mary: Greek Church

Bessie: Going to church, having stuff out there. [Chuckles]

Mary: [Laughing]

Alicia: So how old were you when you started school? Did the whole
Kindergarten thing?

Mary: yes, regular—

Bessie: Yeah, I never went to college. Our second sister Helen went—

Mary: Berkeley

Bessie: to Berkeley and it was quite—my mother of course would not
allow her to leave town. You know a young girl going away, un-
chaperoned and everything, but we had a friend at the Georges and
she had been there. She was able to convince my mother that she

would be perfectly safe down there, so she got to go. Mary went to City College for two years [to Mary] didn't you?

Mary: Yeah.

Bessie: Our youngest sister went to—

Alicia: Did they receive—

Mary: a degree, yeah

Alicia: In what?

Mary: Business

[End Tape 1 Side A, Begin Tape 1 Side B]

Bessie: She was Phi Beta Kappa at Berkeley and she became a reading specialist for the San Juan School District.

Alicia: O.k., so we are talking about going to school. What did Anastasia do?

Bessie: She went to Dillard University at—

Mary: Wacco, Texas

Bessie: Wacco, Texas

Mary: Our mother use to call it wacko, wacko, Texas.

Bessie: Our mother kept saying, "No, you can't go! No, you can't go!"
Taxi waved—in those days—

Mary: I think she took the train.

Bessie: I think she took the train!

Mary: I don't think— We never flew in those days.

Bessie: Then this uncle, who lived with us, would send her money from time to time. So she would have some spending money down there. My mother every time she'd come home, my mother would say, "You can't go back, you can't go back!"

Mary: So then she went and got a teaching credential, but mean while, she moved to New York when she graduated from Daylard.

Bessie: She wanted to go on stage. [Chuckles]

Mary: She sure did [chuckles]—for a short time

Bessie: Then she ended up back here and taught for the Sacramento City Unified School District.

Alicia: So all of you went to Greek School?

Bessie: Yes.

Alicia: Did you go to Greek High School? Is there such a thing?

Bessie: Greek High School? No, Greek school was kind of hit and miss.

Mary: It was just one teacher and there were about thirty students and they would assign you a book or something to read.

Alicia: So was that between elementary and middle school?

Bessie: we would go after—not in place of it.

Alicia: oh, ok.

Bessie: Our parents made sure we went to school and our mother considered a "B" a failing grade.

Alicia: Really.

Mary: She got a "B" on a report card, [imitating mother] "Oh, what happened, what happened!"

Bessie: No, after school we would go to Greek school about three times a week or two times a week.

Mary: Yeah [inaudible]

Alicia: What High School did you attend in Sacramento?

Bessie: Well we went to [C.K.] McClatchy High School.

Mary: [to the interviewer] Did you go there too?

Alicia: No, my brother went to McClatchy. My parents refused to allow me to go to McClatchy.

Mary: Why?

Bessie: Why?

Alicia: Because my brother didn't do so well at McClatchy.

Mary: Oh [chuckles]

Bessie: Oh [chuckles]

Alicia: He got into a little bit of trouble so—

Bessie: Oh, yeah.

Mary: Oh, yeah.

Alicia: once a school—they just got this image that McClatchy was bad so I had to go to a totally different school.

Bessie: Oh

Mary: Where did you go?

Alicia: I actually went to [Luther] Burbank, but I was in the math, science, and engineering program.

Bessie: Oh—

Mary: Oh—

Alicia: So four years of math, four years of science, four years of engineering—

Bessie: that was hard

Alicia: four years of computers, but at least I have a college education and I'm going for my Masters.

Mary: Oh, you're going for your Masters?

Alicia: Yes, this is a graduate class.

Bessie: Oh, that's wonderful.

Alicia: So, I guess it wasn't to bad— Other than Greek school or church were there any other activities that you guys participated in?

Mary: No, but were making up for it now. [Chuckles]

Bessie: [chuckles] No that was it.

Mary: We didn't even leave the state limits until I was 19— I think I went to San Francisco.

Bessie: That was it and then two weeks—

Mary: Finally, went to Reno, I thought, "Oh, my God! I'm finally out of the state!"

Bessie: The first two weeks of August our parents would close the bakery and we would go to Santa Cruz and that was our big excursion.

Alicia: What did you do in Santa Cruz?

Mary: Get black, really black! Our skin would be black; we'd put all this oil with iodine in there—

Bessie: Fried ourselves—oh my God—now we're paying for it—

Mary: During when the war ended, I'll never forget through all that we heard, all the ships started blowing their horns. We thought, "Oh, the war must be over." So everyone rushed and pulled back the black-out curtains which hit the boardwalk and the ocean—

Bessie: It was exciting—

Mary: It was so exciting and then the very next day we drove home, no more gas stamps!

No more ration stamps or anything. We could go to the store and buy anything we wanted. We were kind of lucky 'cause we had the bakery. We got all kinds of stamps for the bakery and then our uncles were [smacks both hands together] single, so they gave us all their shoe coupons and whatever else they had.

Alicia: What things did you do in your pastime? Did you play games? Did you do activities?

Bessie: We read a lot—we all read a lot.

Mary: Oh, yeah. We use to belong to the library book club. We'd get six books and the next day bring them all back. [Imitating the librarian] "You didn't read them!" "Yes we did."

Bessie: Our mother tried to get us to learn to crochet and embroider, but finally she gave up because none of us had any talent or desire to learn to crochet or embroider.

Mary: We went to Riverside Baths once in a while, whenever we could scrape ten cent up for each of us.

Bessie: Well I was not allowed. I didn't go—I never learned to swim.

Mary: Oh, we use to go to the movies—to the matinee—

Bessie: [with Mary] matinee— the Tower theatre on Broadway, which was only two blocks from our house—

Mary: But we would have to scrape bottles, go sell them to get our two-cent, to get enough money for all of us to go.

Bessie: We were dirt poor.

Mary: During and after the Depression.

Alicia: How did your family dynamics change after your mother started working?

Bessie: Well it was hard. I remember when she first went to work I came home to an empty house. It was hard because I was the oldest so it was my responsibility to look after my sisters.

Mary: Which you still do.

Bessie: [chuckles] I never really had much of a childhood. I had to assume a lot of the duties, because I'm the oldest in the family—I don't even remember being a child, seems I was always taking care of

someone or doing something, cleaning house, doing the laundry, it was a lot of work.

Alicia: How long did you continue to stay at home?

Bessie: Until we got married. Nobody in those days moved out. No respectable girl moved out of the house until she got married. That was unheard of.

Alicia: Why didn't you go to college?

Bessie: I don't know—It was during the war and none of my friends were going to college unfortunately. Everybody was looking for workers so I went to work for the state. My first job I was making a hundred and twenty dollars a month, which in those days was a fortune! You know I thought all my friends were making all this money—course later on I regretted it, but by that time it was too late.

Mary: Then I didn't go cause our mother said we couldn't afford it, but Helen and "Testy" they did what they wanted. [Chuckles]

Bessie: Yeah, they went. [Chuckles]

Mary: They were the second and the fourth so they went.

Bessie: Then as young teenagers we worked in the family bakery. You know we went bankrupt. We opened up a smaller bakery and it was on Fifth Street between L and Capital Avenue, you know where Macy's is downtown, in the back of Macy's on the corner there's a Savings and Loan bank, well the bakery was right were

the parking lot is, that's where it was. It was a small operation, but we use to work in the bakery. Even though that part of town had a lot of winos we were never afraid—

Mary: They never bothered us.

Bessie: No one ever touched us. I was 12, 13 years old and I'd work there until nine o'clock at night by myself, but I was never afraid.

Mary: You know, one time they had this union strike for bakers and ours was the only bakery in town that was kept open. We made a lot of money, like three or four thousand dollars a day, so we put it in a paper bag, walked two or three blocks to the bank and no one bothered us. [Chuckles] We weren't afraid of anything.

Bessie: You know everybody, even the winos and the poor people; nobody ever harmed me.

Mary: They never came in and begged for anything.

Bessie: Nothing, Nothing! In all the years we were there. Only one time did they have a burglary, someone came through the skylight.

Mary: [with Bessie] skylight

Bessie: People down there lived in hotels—bachelors—people were poor, but there were honorable people. So we were never afraid at nine o'clock at night. I'd walk up to K Street, wait for the streetcar or the bus and go on home. I was never afraid.

Alicia: Can you describe the local Greek community when you were young?

Bessie: We had a lot of characters [chuckles]

Mary: You could start with Tony Legatos; he's sort of like the Godfather.

Bessie: Yeah, he was the richest man in the Greek community.

Mary: Tony [spells out] Lagatos, in fact he owned the bakery building that our bakery was in. He owned a lot of property he rented to Greek people for restaurants and things. He was instrumental in donating money to build a new church—

Bessie: Where were at now

Mary: In 1951 we built the new church.

Alicia: Was there a huge concentration of Greek businesses around the church?

Bessie: Yes, down on Second and Third Street, all around the bakery there were a lot of businesses. People all lived around the church primarily and then when the church moved to Alhambra and F Street the people moved. Well, they had to move, because the state condemned all those properties to put up the new state buildings. So, that's one reason our church had to move, because they bought the property from us. There weren't too many people who were wealthy but everybody worked together. They'd have a picnic everybody would go or everybody would bring food and share it with everybody. I don't know to me it was a happy time like our—they didn't have enough money to buy candles for the

church, so our [church] mothers would melt the old candles down and melt them down and make new candles—

Mary: I remember them hanging up.

Bessie: We were little then, so we'd be playing out in the courtyard of the church and our mothers would be there making candles, baking, or doing whatever. They made choir robes and alter boy robes. Nobody had any money to pay for anything so everybody worked together. We had some characters that were—funny—I don't know I thought it was a happy community.

Alicia: Were your parents involved in any society at the church or --?

Bessie: Yes our father and our uncle were one of the first contributors to build the first church on N Street. Our father was one of the first parish council presidents; he was president during 1932-33 around in there. He continued being very active in the church. Being in the baking business—whenever the church had a festival or whatever they would donate all the pastries and bread. As I said our mother was a charter member of the women's society and she was very active. After she learned how to drive it was her responsibility to pick up the ladies and they would go to all the different hospitals or visit. They use to have an old mans home on Franklin Boulevard and they had a couple of little Greek men out there, they would go visit them and take pastries and food. That was mommas job. She use to enjoy picking up the ladies and

whenever somebody died, like these bachelors who came from Greece some of them had never married, they had no families, so when they died there was nobody. The ladies, the women's society, would pay for the funeral. My mother and her friends would go, even if they didn't know the man. They felt that it was their duty to accompany this man to his final resting place. She was active until the day that she died. It was very funny because my sister's mother-in-law and my mother would go to church every Sunday, in fact the priest just mentioned it just recently. He remembers the two of them sitting together and they were hard of hearing, so they would whisper and [chuckling] you could hear them down the hall. He said, "You can hear them back there whispering, you could hear them all over, but at least they were here." They were there every Sunday, never missed.

Alicia: Did any of your family belong to either the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association or the Greek American Progressive Association?

Bessie: I belong to both of them.

Alicia: Oh, you belong to both of them.

Mary: At times I've belonged to both of them too.

Alicia: Can you tell me about these organizations?

Bessie: Well at the time the American Hellenic, we called it H.E.P.A., formed because they wanted to help the Greek people mainstream

into American society. That was there mission. Then other people became alarmed. They said well if everybody becomes American what's going to happen to the Greek language and the Greek Culture? So they formed the Greek American, G.A.P.A. we called it. Their job was to preserve the Greek language, Greek religion, and culture, but of course now that's all moot because they don't need those. They're still in existence primarily as social, but H.E.P.A. has now turned around a hundred percent. Now they're intent on preserving the Greek language, culture, and religion so it comes full circle.

Alicia: When were they founded?

Bessie: H.E.P.A. was founded in the early 1920's I believe in Atlanta, Georgia because there was a lot of discrimination against Greek people in those days. The Klu Klux Klan did not like any foreigners. So to protect themselves against people-- if they go apply for a job there'd be a sign, no Greeks—Greeks don't apply or whatever. That's one reason H.E.P.A. was founded.

Alicia: What kind of activities did they do?

Bessie: In those days?

Alicia: Yes

Bessie: They use to have fundraisers. I remember they use to have big balls, big fancy dances. They raised money other ways; they still have a lot of fundraising activities. I'm not to—I'm a member, but

I'm not active in the organization anymore. G.A.P.A. the other one, now there's only a few chapters left in the United States.

Alicia: I guess I'll move to you now because I've talked about your parents. First, How did you meet your husband?

Bessie: Well he used to come to the bakery. Ok, let me back track. His parents when he was away, during World War II in the service, his parents moved up to Capay and they bought an Almond Ranch. So when he came back from the service he didn't want to live up there, there was nothing for him to do up there and rancher he didn't want to be. So he moved to Sacramento to live with their friends, which were also mutual of ours. On his way to work he would stop at the bakery to pick up bread and take it to the family. I use to see him, but when I saw him I didn't think he was Greek. He was very fair light colored haired and I didn't realize he was Greek until somebody told me about it. I had a friend-- [to Mary] do you remember Venetta? For years she kept saying, "Oh, we went to Vallejo to visit the Pothos family." And I didn't know who these people were but she kept saying she went to visit them, because their parents were from the same island. That's how we met you just meet through the Greek community.

Alicia: Was his family actively involved in the church or the community?

Bessie: No, they came here in later years—lets see wee were married in 1949, they moved here in 1948. They did join G.A.P.A. because

my mother made them. [Chuckles] They were not very active in the community primarily because they always lived in places where there was no active Greek community. Else they lived far away from the church and they never really participated, so when him and I were married he really had never participated in Church activities. His Greek was very poor, but anyways that changed—

Alicia: Was it important to you or your family that you married someone Greek?

Bessie: [Chuckles]

Mary: [Chuckles]

Bessie: It was imperative!

Mary: Is the pope Catholic? [Chuckles]

Bessie: [Chuckles] We knew—I knew because when I worked people would ask me out, and I would say oh, no, no! Because I knew I would be annihilated if I went out with someone who wasn't Greek. There was never any question that we all had to marry someone who was—except for our sister.

Mary: Yeah, she was different.

Bessie: By that time she got to do whatever, but the rest of us oh, no.

Alicia: Did she marry someone Greek?

Bessie: No.

Mary: Jones was his name, Bob Jones.

Alicia: Do you have any children?

Bessie: I have one daughter, Linda, three grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

Alicia: How old is she?

Bessie: Linda is 56 and my oldest grandson is 27, the second one is 25, and Amanda is 20. My little big granddaughter is 4 and the baby is 5 months.

Alicia: So Mary how did you meet your husband?

Mary: Well, I knew him forever, but he was five years older and when your young five years is a big difference. So my first state job he was working there and—

Alicia: Which was where?

Mary: The Department of Justice

Alicia: What did you do?

Mary: Secretary—so he—my boss said I was shy so during coffee breaks he went to Cyril because he new he was Greek also. He said, “come take care of Mary, she doesn’t know anyone and she’s to shy!” So five—48, three years later we ended up getting married.

Alicia: Wow! Do you have children?

Mary: I have two daughters, Angela whose 45 and Nancy whose 42.

Bessie: and four grandchildren

Mary: four grandchildren, yeah

Alicia: Was your husband active in the Greek community and church?

Mary: well—he always said, “I’m not a joiner,” which is exactly what he did. He was active, he went everywhere but he wasn’t involved in the politics of it. [Imitating husband] I’m not joining!

Alicia: Did any of your children go to Greek school?

Mary: No!

Bessie: No!

Mary: They cuss us out all the time now. I thought it was too much trouble to take them to Greek school. Fortunately they understand everything and they can say a few words now and then.

Bessie: Well when I was working my mother-in-law took care of Linda until she died. Linda was 7 when my mother-in-law died. Up until that time she spoke Greek fluently with her grandmother. She doesn’t speak anymore, but she does understand it.

Mary: Yeah just like my two they were around their aunt and grandmother a lot, Cyril’s mother and sister.

Alicia: Why didn’t you teach them or make it—?

Bessie: Because I was working and it was hard—

Mary: I didn’t think it was important—and now—

Bessie: In those days we didn’t think it was important and Linda took ballet, piano, she was in campfire girls, as I said I was working you know how many things—I took her here, I took her there—

Mary: They did go to Greek school for a short time because we carpooled with another family. They did this for about six months or

something and then we just stopped—it was probably driving back and forth because I was working full time and so was my husband.

Bessie: See to our parents it was very important during the four years that we lived in North Sacramento we were little kids—

Mary: Yeah we were young.

Bessie: this was the early 1930's, so I was 8 or 9, and you were 5 or 6, we would, by ourselves now, we would go to school and after school we would get on the bus and ride all the way to Sacramento. We'd get off there was a train—

Mary: There was a terminal for trains on 12th and I Street.

Bessie: Our train would get off on 12th and I Street and in those days Greek school was at William Land School, which was on 11th and V Street—

Mary: and we'd walk from the train

Bessie: We walked from I Street clear up to V Street, pouring rain sometimes. Three kids we would walk by ourselves, carrying our books—

Mary: The underpass would be flood a lot of the time you know the 16th or 12th Street underpass—

Bessie: Yeah

Mary: But we managed to get to school.

Bessie: Yeah, we both did—then we'd get off 7, 8 o'clock at night and sometimes it'll be pitch black. We would walk from all the way up

I Street wait for the bus get on the bus and go home. We wouldn't get home until 9 sometimes 9:30 and have our dinner then—but we did it.

Mary: Now, if a kid wants to go around the corner you have to give them a ride—

Bessie: You have to ride them, and here we were riding and walking for blocks and blocks.

Alicia: Did you feel that it was important, as parents, to instill in them the Greek identity although you didn't take them to Greek school?

Bessie: No, not really I took Linda to Sunday school every Sunday from the time she was 3 until she was 13 and then they didn't have any more classes. For a short time she did belong to a Greek organization, Maids of Athena, which is a part of the American Hellenic Educational Society. For a short time she was in choir but that was about it, she didn't really participate that much.

Mary: I had the two daughters. My older daughter is adopted and then the second one I had naturally, but the one who is adopted is so Greek, if you say she's not Greek, Oh, my God! She tells everyone— she's blonde, blue eyed very fair and her kids are blonde, blue eyed— but she's 100% Greek. She takes her kids to Greek dance lessons, which is quite a ways, about six months out of the year. Then she goes to the dance festival which is usually Ashton's birthday weekend. Her kids are wonderful Greek

dancers. Then my Greek, Greek daughter doesn't do anything Greek. In fact she goes to Catholic Church she hasn't turned to Catholicism. I said, "I don't care what you do as long as you remain Greek Orthodox!" The kids are all baptized. I don't care, but I just want her to stay Greek Orthodox [chuckles] but anyways she's different.

Bessie: I think it's because of our strict upbringing. We just felt that we should give our children a little bit more leeway, let them make their own choices, which we had no choice of anything.

Alicia: Did you feel any conflict between the American culture of your children and your Greek identity?

Bessie: No, I don't think so. Now that they're getting older they love—like Easter Sunday was last Sunday, well every single one of our children and grandchildren, everybody was there. Our entire family—they love coming to all the Greek get togethers. Now when the children were younger my grand children of course were altar boys, but once they got older and went away to college that all stopped. They're not so active anymore.

Alicia: What about your family? Was your social life centered on the Greek community or did you branch out socially?

Bessie: No, my husband and I were very—to this day I really don't have—

Mary: American friends [chuckles]

Bessie: to many non-Greek friends—I belong to a couple of bridge groups that are non-Greek or part Greek. Our social life—Cliff was very active in the church. He was on the parish council for several years and for about 20 years he went down to the Greek Food Festival—he would save a week of his vacation every year to go down there and work setting the booths up. They use to, before they got professionally built booths, he use to build ‘em! A couple of our friends would come in our garage and they’d be building booths, building scenery. He was very active for over 20 years doing that.

Alicia: What was your husband’s occupation? [Phone rings]

Bessie: He was an electronic technician at McClellan Air Force Base. He worked in communications systems. But our friends to this day are Greek. As I said I never had a chance to develop any other friendships when I was growing up.

Alicia: When you were young or even now did you feel any bias or prejudice because of your Greek background?

Bessie: Well if it was it was subdued you know? It wasn’t flagrant—but, oh, I imagine when we went to California Junior High and we lived on W Street—well—anybody who lived on the north side of Broadway—you know went to the William Land School and that wasn’t one of the elite schools in Sacramento. If you didn’t go to

Crocker School you know—that theater school was considered a bit lower than the kids that came from Crocker or Brete Harte.

Mary: Class distinction

Bessie: They never really said anything but you know—

Alicia: What about you [to Mary]? Did you experience any prejudices or biases because of your Greek background?

Mary: No, but my husband did. When he got out of the service in 45 or 46 he went to join the Elks Club they wouldn't accept him because he had foreign sounding name. So he never joined and he never again tried to join an organization like that [chuckles].

Alicia: I guess I'll frame this in a broader question. Was ethnic prejudice or discrimination a concern for the Greek community as a whole?

Bessie: I don't think so. Not in Sacramento. Perhaps in places-- like where they had the Klu Klux Klan—even in Salt Lake City the Mormons did not want to hire Greeks as a lot of Greeks became Mormons so they could get jobs. But I don't think that in California we had these problems.

Mary: I don't remember.

Bessie: Of course-- We kind of stayed to ourselves too. So perhaps if we tried to join the Junior League or something [chuckles] we would have been rejected. But we never tried to do any of those things.

Alicia: So I guess my last question is how the Greek community changed in its lifetime?

[End of tape one side B, Begin tape two side A]

Alicia: This is the beginning of tape two and we are discussing how the Sacramento Greek Community has changed over its lifetime with Bessie and Mary.

Bessie: Well I think that our community has progressed quite a bit. As you know—Greeks as a whole in the United States have a very high socioeconomic status, and an overwhelming majority of our members now are college educated. We have many professionals in our community—we have professors, doctors, lawyers and we have dentists. A lot of people have become very successful in their professions and I their businesses.

Mary: Is Antelo listed among the top 400 millionaires? [To Bessie]

Bessie: No, he's not there.

Mary: Alex Spanos is—

Bessie: Yeah—we all tried very hard to help our children succeed. Even though I didn't go to college I made sure my daughter went to college. She has a Master's Degree and she has an administrative credential. So we all tried to make sure that our children had a little bit better life than we did—more education. Even though our mother was practically illiterate she wanted us to go to school and do the best that we could. I think—even though people have succeeded they don't come to church regularly, but the other night it was standing room only [chuckles] on Easter.

Alicia: Always is—same with my church too.

Bessie: Yeah that's it. I think everybody has strived to succeed and to blend in with the American way of life.

Alicia: Was it like that when you were a child?

Mary: No.

Bessie: We had very few [professionals].

Mary: We had two or three Greek professionals -- Tom Lovis and Joe Andrews.

Bessie: There were very few people who went to college--

Alicia: What did they do?

Bessie: Tom was a lawyer and Joe was a --

Mary: Pharmacist.

Bessie: A Pharmacist. That was about it. We had in Sacramento, very few people who went on to college primarily because in those days people didn't have the economic means to send their children to college. We did not have any local colleges here so in order to go to college you had to go away to Berkeley, which meant you had to have money to rent a room or whatever. Now it's a little bit easier [phone rings] because there's a college right here and a lot of the Greek kids have gone there.

Alicia: Well, I guess we will end the interview on that note. Thank you!

[End of Interview]